

Revolutionary Style and Sound: Feminism, Fashion and Music in the 1970s

The beauty of contemporary arts, such as fashion and music, is that they are almost always interconnected. The decade of the 1970s served as an era of defiance and female liberation, where women in creative and political spaces were disrupting the patriarchy through more than just protests/marches. Influential women such as Gloria Steinem, Dorothy Pittman-Hughes, and bell hooks promoted the fight for equality in the political sphere. In contrast, creatives such as Stevie Nicks, Joan Jett, Nina Simone, and Vivienne Westwood redefined what it meant to be a woman in the fashion/musical realm. By analyzing these themes collectively, we can observe how female musicians used fashion to amplify their stage persona while simultaneously using their platform to increase visibility of feminist issues.

The Second-Wave Feminist Movement was characterized by fights for reproductive rights and workplace equality, a critique of gender roles, and the amplification of LGBTQ+ voices. At the forefront of this movement were activists such as Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman-Hughes. In tandem, these two women promoted the integration of multiracial, inclusive feminism, laying the foundation for increased intersectionality in feminist spaces (Denney). With their iconic photograph captured by Dan Wynn, the pair emphasized the need for solidarity and togetherness within feminist and civil rights matters during the 1970s (Figure 1). As this photograph was printed in *Esquire* magazine, whose demographic was traditionally directed towards men, Steinem and Pittman-Hughes embodied the essential need to diminish the male gaze (Molko).

As a co-founder of *Ms. Magazine*, Steinem aided in the coverage of the feminist discourse through a broader media lens. Her journalistic work confronted the patriarchal mindsets subtly ingrained in societal culture and shed light on issues faced by working-class

women of colour alongside Pitman-Hughes. It is important to note that while their partnership was certainly influential, Pitman-Hughes was often overshadowed by Steinem, as the second-wave feminist movement as a whole was focused more on the ideals of white cisgender perspectives. As a pioneering Black feminist, Dorothy Pitman-Hughes stressed the importance of making feminist spaces inclusive across all levels, a concept which would later become “intersectionality,” a term coined by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (Biana). The idea of intersectional feminism presented by Crenshaw was derived from feminist theorist bell hooks, who openly critiqued the exclusionary practices of mainstream feminism, sharing similar beliefs as Pitman-Hughes (Biana).

As feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman-Hughes fought political battles in the United States, the United Kingdom saw the beginning of a fashion revolution, underscored by the punk movement, defiance and anarchy. The era of punk music can be analyzed through the lens of fashion and feminism by examining the work of popular British designer Vivienne Westwood. In her early years, Westwood operated her shop under the label ‘SEX’ in London’s borough of Chelsea. This shop is regarded as the birthplace of the punk aesthetic/fashion, as the infamous UK band the Sex Pistols maintained a close relationship with Westwood and her partner at the time, Malcolm McLaren (Worley). As band manager of the Pistols, McLaren utilized Westwood’s outlandish apparel, characterized by bondage-style garments and controversial graphics, to solidify the punk aesthetic of the band.

Members Sid Vicious, Johnny Rotten, Steve Jones and Paul Cook were almost always adorned with Westwood’s garments, whether they were on or off stage (Onessimo). Although the Sex Pistols were not entirely associated with feminist ideologies, their identity was rooted in disrupting societal norms, challenging the monarchy and the fascist regime. Influential figures in

the band's social circle, such as Vivienne Westwood and Pamela Rooke, utilized fashion to express their political views and challenge the traditional beliefs of what women should wear. As a close friend of Vivienne Westwood, Pamela Rooke (otherwise known as Jordan) was a prominent figure in the punk fashion scene during the 1970s and aided in creating the Sex Pistols' signature look (Hess).

Westwood's overall subversive dress style was the epitome of "anti-fashion," a term used to describe the implementation of defying traditional conventions of what constitutes something as "fashionable" (Ban). Anti-fashion as an aesthetic exemplified the satirical rebellion of dress, adopting unconventional concepts that intentionally mocked or contradicted preconceived notions of fashion. Westwood's use of historical garments, such as tightly laced corsets, juxtaposed with torn muslin graphics adorned with safety pins, recontextualized femininity as performative (Steele). In doing so, Vivienne Westwood's fashion reiterated the feminist critique of gender norms and constructs, emphasizing the call for autonomy and self-declaration.

The music industry in the 1970s ushered in a new era for women who redefined lyricism, fashion and stage persona on their own terms. In the context of R&B/soul music, artist Nina Simone is one of many women who ingrained feminist/political ideologies within her signature sound. Previously known for her contributions during the civil rights movement, Simone's musical style often expressed the joys and hardships associated with her heritage as a Black woman in the 1970s (Hawk). Songs such as "Young, Gifted and Black," "Four Women," and "Mississippi Goddamn" were underscored by a political commentary of issues regarding racism, sexism, and classism that uplifted generations of Black women and continue to do so today. Her artistry surpassed the boundaries of genre by seamlessly fusing soul, blues, and jazz with powerful poetic lyrics that produced emotional, empathetic anthems of resistance. In regard to

her fashion, Nina Simone unapologetically showcased her personal style on and off stage, adopting bold, floral garments, statement accessories, and head wraps, paying homage to her Black heritage (Davis).

In the rock and roll realm, contrasting artists Joan Jett and Stevie Nicks exemplified a new image for women in rock music in their own unique ways. As the forerunner of the all-female band, The Runaways, Jett challenged gender norms in the predominantly male rock scene with her androgynous vocals and stylistic choices. Adorned primarily in rugged leather jackets, tailored suits and lace-up combat boots, Jett exemplified the punk aesthetic and feminist refusal to be suppressed. It is important to note that Joan Jett did not inherently identify as a feminist, as the term was not widely acknowledged at the beginning of her career. Yet, her opinions carried out similar to ideologies associated with feminism and the punk movement, such as adopting a non-conformist attitude that allowed people to express themselves regardless of gender (Hunsky).

In contrast to Jett's hard-core punk aesthetic, Stevie Nicks adopted a more ethereal, whimsical approach to addressing the feminist discourse through her music. Throughout her extensive musical history, she has been an icon since joining the well-known band Fleetwood Mac and continues to assimilate the traditional hypermasculine nature of rock music/culture. During the 1970s, there was a profound "macho mindset" surrounding the type of rock music released and the artists that performed the songs (Olson). Women in these songs were mainly assigned to two different categories/stereotypes: one represented by the "Madonna" or virgin/mother figure, the other as a devil or temptress. With her whimsical style characterized by flowing shawls and bohemian silhouettes in tandem with her poetic lyricism and effervescent

self-assurance, Nicks portrayed how women could explore a softer, feminine side without sacrificing strength or autonomy.

Despite their differing musical styles, Joan Jett, Stevie Nicks and Nina Simone carry the same underlying message through the lyrics in their songs. For example, in “Mississippi Goddamn” by Simone, she states, “*You don’t have to live next to me / Just give me my equality,*” which directly addressed the white hypocrisy at the time. These lyrics present an unapologetic depiction of Black suffering, ingrained with rage yet backed by her bold performance style; she pushes against both gender and racial constraints. In contrast, the lyrics of “Bad Reputation” by Joan Jett and The Blackhearts, released in 1981, exuded the idea of self-assertion and resisting the need to conform with the phrase “*I don’t give a damn about my reputation.*” Nicks’ lyrics in songs such as “Goldust Woman” and “Rhiannon” redefined the feminine persona in rock music, offering a more whimsical yet vulnerable form of rebellion.

Altogether, the 1970s showcased how feminism was not confined to the political sphere, but rather expressed by how women dressed, performed and spoke. Influential women such as activists Gloria Steinem, Dorothy Pittman-Hughes and bell hooks pushed for profound change on a societal level, while creatives such as Vivienne Westwood, Joan Jett, Nina Simone and Stevie Nicks adopted everyday practices that promoted feminist ideologies. Whether it was through bold floral prints, torn muslin, rugged leather or flowing lace, fashion as an entity allowed these women to rewrite the narrative of feminists in creative fields. The second-wave feminist movement, exemplified through these women, showed that the personal was indeed political, suggesting feminism as more than just a movement, but as a pivotal moment in culture.

Appendix

Figure 1: Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman Hughes *New York 1971* © Dan Wynn Archive and Farmani Group, Co LTD. <http://www.danwynn.com> via <https://www.mcnyc.org/story/remembering-dorothy-pitman-hughes>



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